

Central Intelligence Agency

Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

8 March 1984

Drug Traffickers' Relations with the Media in
Colombia, Bolivia, and PeruSummary

Drug traffickers in Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru increasingly recognize the ability of the media to influence public perceptions about their activities. Colombian and Bolivian traffickers have undertaken extensive, highly visible efforts in recent years to enhance their images and activities, to build on the general public acceptance of the drug trade, and to discredit government control programs through manipulation of the print and broadcast media. Peruvian traffickers, on the other hand, have used violence to discourage journalists from focusing attention on their illegal activities. [REDACTED]

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Colombia: Traffickers Take The High Road

Traffickers' exploitation of the media in Colombia has built upon ambivalent public opinion and the longstanding belief that controlling drug trafficking and drug abuse is a "norte americano" problem. The particular emphasis has been the notion that Latin American countries have cultivated coca and marijuana

This memorandum was prepared by [REDACTED] International Security Issues Division, Office of Global Issues. The analysis is based on information as of 8 March 1984. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to Chief, Strategic Narcotics Branch, OGI, [REDACTED]

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for traditional uses for centuries and that U.S. attempts to direct narcotic control programs represent interference in Colombia's internal affairs. Some major Colombian traffickers have used their access to the press to portray themselves as national heroes or as public-spirited benefactors interested in promoting betterment of the population and maintaining national integrity. [REDACTED]

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Access to the Press

Cocaine giant Carlos Lehder Rivas has been especially successful in using the media to his advantage. Stressing the issue of nationalism, Lehder has financed full-page ads in Colombia's major newspapers and magazines opposing the government's anti-drug efforts in general, and the US-Colombian Extradition Treaty in particular. He has granted interviews knowing they will command coverage by radio, television, and the press. In July 1983, he startled even those accustomed to his outspokenness by openly admitting his involvement in narcotics trafficking which he justified as bringing badly needed dollars into the Colombian economy. [REDACTED]

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Lehder has insured regular dissemination of his views through the Quindio Libre, a weekly newspaper he purchased in his native Department of Quindio in 1982. The paper serves as a platform for the political party he founded in 1983--the Latin National Movement--which he has described as a "simple civic movement representing a small forgotten people." Lehder's unrelenting attack on the US-Colombian Extradition Treaty in his paper and other publications helped create the unfavorable political climate that blocked the US request for extradition of two major Colombian traffickers in late 1983. [REDACTED]

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Another major trafficker, Pablo Escobar Gavira, commands space in the press by paying for it, in the opinion of some Colombian journalists, or by his political activities. In early 1983, an article suspected as Escobar-inspired appeared in the popular magazine Semana, ranking him not only as one of the wealthiest men in Colombia, but also as one of the most powerful men in the world. The feature depicted him as a local hero in his native Department of Antioquia, a great benefactor and promoter of his city. Quindio Libre frequently carries unsolicited, favorable articles on Escobar, praising him as a "critical, independent thinker." Escobar's local influence and financial contributions have secured him an appointment as an alternate Liberal Party member of Congress. Embassy reports indicate his desire to exert more direct political influence, a goal his efforts to publicize a glorified popular image would support. [REDACTED]

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Access to the Airwaves

Through the purchase of radio stations, narcotics traffickers in Colombia have acquired the capacity to convey their stand on drug-related issues to an even larger audience. According to US Embassy reports in late 1983, known cocaine traffickers Gilberto and Miguel Rodriguez purchased Colombia's fourth largest radio network, Grupo Radial Colombiano, which includes twenty-three stations that effectively cover the nation. In addition, the Rodriguez brothers obtained ten new broadcasting licenses and have launched a second network, Radio Rumbos. Broadcast personnel have told Embassy representatives that these networks enjoy large operating budgets and employ veteran radio personalities who were lured away from other networks by enormous salaries. [REDACTED]

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Anti-drug Media Efforts

Although traffickers have successfully flooded the media with their message, the anti-drug forces in Colombia have some respected supporters in the media. Mauricio Gomez, director of Colombia's popular 24 Horas news program, won the 1983 Simon Bolivar Prize for Journalism, Colombia's most prestigious journalism award in the category of Investigative Television Reporting for his five-part series The Cocaine Connection. He produced this documentary in the United States with US assistance. Although the Colombian government is only beginning officially to acknowledge the problem of domestic drug abuse, the Colombian media has been attempting to enhance the public's awareness. For example,

- ° El Tiempo, Bogota's major daily newspaper, has urged the state to recognize growing drug abuse among the young as a serious national problem; and
- ° EL Espectador, Colombia's second largest daily, has given thorough and balanced coverage to the herbicide issue and has written about the connection between drug traffickers and insurgents. [REDACTED]

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Bolivia: Grassroots Approach

Publicity efforts sponsored by Bolivian drug traffickers are directed at the campesinos who grow and refine coca, and seek to exploit the view widely held in Bolivia that the illicit drug industry helps support large segments of the population. The dominant themes have been that coca cultivation is an economic necessity for many hard-pressed farmers and that the use of herbicides in eradication will poison vast portions of the environment and the population for generations. Heightened awareness of their stake in the issue has prompted large numbers of campesinos to join organizations such as the Coca Congress and

the Chapare Farmers' Federation which serve as strong defenders of coca cultivation. According to US Embassy officials, even though these organizations are masterminded and largely financed by traffickers, they provide a rallying point for the individuals most directly affected by government eradication plans. []

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Reaching the Masses

Cocaine proponents in Bolivia produced an expensive, prime-time television show in September 1982, The Legend of Coca. According to the US Embassy, this was an extremely effective propaganda device in a country where the literacy rate is substantially lower than that of Colombia or Peru. According to US Embassy reports, the film was the brainchild of journalist Gonzalo Lopez Munoz and financed largely by narcotics trafficker Jose Paz Hurtado. We concur with the view of the US Embassy that it was a skillful blend of a few facts and many distortions, such as blurring the distinction between coca and cocaine. At the urging of US officials, Bolivia's Minister of Information refused to allow a second showing of the film, fired the director of Bolivian national TV, and rebroadcast the USIS documentary, The Continuing War on Drugs, which had been shown a year earlier.

[] According to press and Embassy reports the leading trafficker behind the media campaign that reached a peak in 1982 was Roberto Suarez Gomez--known in Bolivia as the "king of cocaine." Suarez adopted a direct personal approach to the press but unlike Carlos Lehder in Colombia, steadfastly denied any involvement in the drug trade. He cultivated the "local boy makes good" image, attributing his wealth to cattle ranching. In a series of open letters, Suarez charged President Reagan with forcing coca eradication in Bolivia to protect purported extensive coca plantations in California, denying the struggling Bolivian farmer both his birthright and livelihood. []

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With a great deal of fanfare, Suarez flew radio and newspaper journalists to his ranch in the Beni in July 1983 for a series of interviews during which he described a sophisticated defense system to protect himself from possible apprehension by agents of the US Drug Enforcement Administration who, along with the US Ambassador, he claims have made slanderous charges against him. Suarez offered to surrender to US authorities to prove his innocence of drug trafficking charges pending against him in the United States on the condition that the United States pay the Bolivian foreign debt. []

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Achieving Results

Efforts by traffickers succeeded in influencing or altering some government efforts. For example, in the spring of 1982 controversy in the press over the use of herbicides prompted the government of General Torrelío to renounce further use of

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The Legend of Coca

Broadcast nationally, the film retold the ancient Andean legend of how a sympathetic god gave the gift of coca to the long-suffering Andean people to enable them to withstand the cold and hunger of the mountains. Since the gift was intended only for the pure of heart--anticipating current US problems with cocaine--the televised version of the legend claimed: "If the cruel men of the north, the white conquerors"... "should touch the leaves, they will only find in it poison for their bodies and madness for their minds, because their hearts are hardened."

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The Legend of Coca defended coca's biological benefits: increasing respiration, safely alleviating anxiety and depression, and even serving as a food substitute with nutritional value superior to other, unspecified South American foods. Dire warnings about the biological dangers of the herbicides used in eradication increased the volume of misinformation that has created widespread public fears about herbicides. The film ends with a call to legalize, nationalize, and industrialize coca, directing it towards the manufacture of concentrated food, anesthetics and anti-depressive medication. The film argues that the medicinal market rightfully belongs to the coca-producing countries, but through extensive marketing efforts, foreign transnational corporations have created a preference for their synthetic drugs which, though inferior and marred by dangerous side effects, net billions of dollars. Thus, the film concludes that the major reason the United States is trying to eradicate Bolivian coca is to better compete in this lucrative market.

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herbicides for such purposes, bringing the US-funded pilot eradication project in Yapacani to a halt. Similarly, the national broadcasting of The Legend of Coca in September 1982 probably strengthened the inclination of the Torrelio's successor, General Vildoso--since replaced by Herman Siles--to defer action on its five year coca control plan. []

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Peru: Trafficking and the Media

Trafficker-instigated violence against investigative journalists has reached a significant level in Peru. Journalists attempting to examine the suppliers of drugs have been the objects of violence or intimidation on several occasions:

- ° A dynamite attack in July 1983 destroyed the automobile of newsmen Edgar Puertocarrero, a correspondent for the Peruvian newspaper La Republica and the BBC, London, who was investigating drug trafficking in the city of Tarapoto in the northern Amazon region of Peru. Puertocarrero reported he had also received threats against his life.
- ° Carlos Vegue, director of the weekly Selva, was severely beaten, and the house of Manuel Areval, correspondent for opposition newspaper, El Diario, was set afire. Both men were publishing articles critical of drug traffickers.
- ° Both the radio and newspapers reported the January 1983 arrest of Catalino Escalante Calvo, known as the drug trafficking czar of Tingo Maria, during a cocaine seizure. Escalante was also charged with murdering journalist Orlando Carreras in September 1982.

Articles linking reprisals with investigative reporting on trafficking have been published as warnings to other journalists. Citing personal experience, authors have stated that a reporter who attempts such a project "is taking his life into his hands." []

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Notwithstanding these attempts at intimidation, the Peruvian press continues to report drug arrests, seizures, and trials, in a straightforward, objective manner. President Belaunde's strong public statements against the drug trade receive thorough coverage, as do the details of government control efforts. The Peruvian media also pursue the problem of domestic drug abuse aggressively, with frequent articles, editorials, and surveys. The press, for example, has highlighted a serious increase in the dangerous practice of smoking coca paste, known as basucas. Using coca in this semi-refined state, the smoker inhales harmful impurities, including kerosene and cement. The clearly damaging nature of this substance has generated widespread concern about the effects of drug consumption on users and society. []

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While there is general agreement in Peru that smoking bazucas is harmful, debate over marijuana consumption continues. The press reflects the arguments in favor of legalization but balances its coverage by including arguments against legalization as well. For example, in 1983 Lima's El Observador, published the results of a survey on the attitudes of university students toward legalization of marijuana. Seventy-five percent favored legalization for the following reasons: marijuana is widely used; its dangers are not documented; and legalization would eliminate one of its major attractions, i.e., that it is forbidden. To counter student arguments the article quoted a prominent Peruvian psychiatrist who argued that: marijuana use can cause genetic damage in the children of users; users become mentally sluggish; and marijuana in users tend to progress toward stronger, more dangerous drugs. [REDACTED]

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Use of the Media by Latin American
Drug Traffickers

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1. The attached memorandum examines the use of the media by drug traffickers in Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru to influence public opinion.

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2. This memorandum was prepared by International Security Issues Division, Office of Global Issues.

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3. Oqueries and comments are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Strategic Narcotics Branch, OGI,

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Attachment:

Drug Traffickers' Relations with the Media in
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